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ABSTRACT

Paskewicz (1984) believes that the language individuals use conveys information about the possibility of change, independent of content. To test this notion, consultant-consultee verbal interactions were analyzed. Advanced doctoral students in school psychology (N=4) served as consultants; consultees were 19 parochial school teachers each of whom presented at the first consulting session a behavioral problem related to an individual child. The interviews were taped, and judgments of goal attainment were based on teachers' self-reports of whether or not they implemented the consultant's plan. Results showed that consultants made significantly fewer language-structure errors, i.e., they used significantly fewer judgmental adjectives, fewer abstract nouns as explanations, and fewer "shoulds" and their equivalents than their teacher-consultees. Also, a significant negative relationship was found between the rate of teacher-consultee language structure errors and the attainment of the goal of consultation. Consultees who used fewer "shoulds," adjectives, and abstract nouns were more likely to solve the problems they presented in the consultation session. (Author/JAC)

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When Behavioral Consultation Fails...

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ABSTRACT

Paskewicz (1984) believes that the language individuals use conveys information about the possibility of change, independent of content. To test this notion consultant-consultee verbal interactions were analyzed. Consultants made significantly fewer language-structure errors, i.e., they used significantly fewer judgmental adjectives, fewer abstract nouns as explanations and fewer "shoulds" and their equivalents than their teacher-consultees. Also, a significant negative relationship was found between the rate of teacher-consultee language structure errors and the attainment of the goal of consultation. Consultees who used fewer "shoulds", adjectives and abstract nouns were more likely to solve the problems they presented in the consultation session.

The Possibility of Change: Success in Consultation

Paskewicz (1984) presented a rationale for and outline of Language-Structure theory. In summary, language structure conveys information about the possibility of change, independent of content. In other words, what is said about a child may be less important for successful interventions than how it is said.

Views of human motivation can be characterized on a dimension varying from static (child-centered) to dynamic (situation centered). What is done about a school problem depends on how it is perceived. Progress in problem solving recounts a history of the development of an interactive perspective. Consultation efforts are typically directed at changing the perspective taken by clients who are stuck in a limiting world view. Perspective, however, is molded by language. Our choice of words creates the realities which we then can see and respond to (Pearce, 1971).

Certain language structures limit the possibility of change. Judgmental adjectives, abstract nouns used as explainers and "shoulds" and their equivalents structure perspective so that change is less possible. Adjectives lock in a view of a person to whom a permanent status is attributed. Regardless of whether people are characterized as one-up or one-down, such static descriptions not only lead to and reinforce the belief that interactions cannot influence people but also create power struggles between people.

Abstract nouns turn short hand descriptions into quasi-explanations (McClelland, 1973). Nouns are used commonly to explain why people engage in certain behaviors. However, they deny the interpersonal nature of reality by turning interactions into quantities. Nouns put reasons for behavior inside a person.

"Shoulds" and their equivalents (Ellis, 1979) confuse reality with "expectations". Such language represents a pressured, passive mode of thinking, which reduces behavioral options and flexibility of response.

Language Structure theory predicts that those who use "shoulds", adjectives that categorize and abstract nouns as explainers are less likely to want to make changes. In a consultation situation, consultees who use this static language style are less likely to comply with conclusions and recommendations of consultation. Since consultants are people who are interested in creating change, it is hypothesized that consultants will make fewer language structure errors than consultees. It is also hypothesized that the number of language structure errors made by consultees will be inversely related to attainment of the goal of consultation.

METHOD

Subjects

Four (three male and one female) advanced doctoral students in school psychology served as consultants in this study. They all had had

three semesters of training in both mental health and behavioral consultation.

Nineteen (16 female and 3 male) teachers served as the consultees in this study. They were all employed in Catholic schools in Central Texas and volunteered for a training program in behavioral classroom management techniques.

Materials

The tape recordings of the first consultation contact - the Problem Identification Interview (PII) were used in this study. They were the tapes used in the Clark (1978) study of expert and collaborative consultation. Goal attainment was rated by the consultant following completion of the consultation sessions based on teachers' self reports. These were based on a five point scale ranging from plan not implemented to goal completely attained.

Procedures

The teachers were instructed to come to the first weekend training session with a problem related to an individual child in their classroom. The only constraint was that it be a behavioral (as opposed to an academic) problem. They were informed ahead of time that they would meet with an experienced behavior analysis consultant for about twenty minutes. During PII, the consultant introduced him/herself to the teacher and gave a short explanation of the purpose of the meeting. The PII included a series of steps leading to the specification of the presented

problem ending with the designation of the goal to be achieved through consultation. See Kazgan (1977) for extended discussion of the PII.

The taped PII interviews were scored for the number of minutes taken for the consultation session following the initial introductions. A frequency count of the language structure errors were recorded separately for the consultants and the consultees. Three categories of errors were scored and tallied. One category tallied all equivalents of the word should - have to, must, etc. A second category tallied all adjectives used to describe a child as opposed to a child's behavior, i.e., quiet, bad, afraid, fat, etc. The third category tallied all abstract nouns used to explain children's behaviors, i.e., attitude, motivation, personality, intelligence, etc. The total number of language structure errors was divided by consultation time. Data are, therefore, presented in the form of language structure errors per minute. Goal attainment was a rating done by the consultant based on the teachers' self-report. The five point scale ranged from plan not implemented to goal completely attained.

RESULTS

Five of the 19 complete tapes (26%) were selected for a reliability study. Total number of language structure errors tallied by two independent raters were correlated. A criterion of .80 was selected as acceptable prior to the ratings. A $p<.05$ level of confidence was adopted for all statistical analyses. A significant correlation of .81

showed that the number of language structure errors could be reliably determined.

In hypothesis one it was predicted that consultants would emit fewer errors per minute than consultees. Results revealed that consultants made significantly fewer total language structure errors, $t(36) = 4.59$, $p<.05$. Consultants (CT) on average made a language structure error every three minutes (CT = .37) while the consultee (CE) made one every minute (CE=.91). Consultants had a significantly lower rate of use of abstract nouns (.10 vs. .20), $t(36)=2.50$; $p<.05$); had a significantly lower rate of the use of judgmental adjectives (.19 vs. .52), $t(36)=4.71$, $p<.05$; and had a significantly lower rate of the use of shoulds and their equivalents (.06 vs. .21), $t(36)=1.51$, $p<.05$.

In hypothesis two a negative relationship between language structure error rate of the consultee and the measure of goal attainment was predicted. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between rate of consultee language structure errors and attainment of the goal of consultation ($g=46$). Consultees who used fewer shoulds, adjectives, and abstract nouns were more likely to solve the problems they presented in the consultation session. The rate of language structure errors for the consultees was not related to the rate of such errors for the consultants ($g=.26$).

DISCUSSION

Language Structure theory postulates that the presence of certain language errors relating to the structure, as opposed to the content, of communication decreases the possibility of change. Evidence for the usefulness of this theory is found in the fact that consultants, who are in the business of change, made fewer errors than teacher consultees even though they expressed a desire for change. These results were found despite the fact that consultants were not specifically trained in language structure and the avoidance of language errors.

Further, evidence for the usefulness of the theory was found in the prediction of successful goal attainment based on the language structure error rate. Twenty percent of the variance of goal attainment scores was accounted for by language structure error rates of the consultees. Thus, language error rate may be used as a measure, in part, of the possible success of a consultation program following the initial problem identification session. Consultees who are predicted to be successful in attaining the goal of consultation make less than 1.23 language structure errors per minute. For those consultees who make greater than 1.23 errors per minute, an intermediate goal might be to change their perspectives via language prior to consultation which would allow the possibility of change.

The reliability of the rates of language structure errors may have been lowered since the scores were derived, not from transcripts of consultation sessions, but from listening to less than studio quality audio tape recordings. It is expected that the use of transcripts would greatly increase the reliability estimate.

As Gresham (1984) has recently pointed out, consultant's interviewing strategies can prove to be valid and reliable assessment techniques when recognized and practiced to a level of proficiency. It seems likely, then, in light of the results of this study, that consultants can be trained to recognize the significance of the verbal statements of their consultees. Thus, training in appropriate interviewing technqiues will be enhanced when paired with skills in recognition of consultees' readiness to change as exhibited by their language usage.

Further studies into the use and usefulness of structured language theory now appear to be feasible. Future projects may include a study of the personality of the consultees, which may play a significant role in their inclination to change their own behavior or to work toward the behavioral change of students under their charge. It is likely that a fruitful area of research would be the exploration of personality variables of consultees in relation to language usage.

This study also shows the usefulness of archival data originally used to test a different set of hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of consultation (Bryant & Wortman, 1978). Researchers who have tapes and/or

transcripts of consultations sessions and measures of effectiveness are encouraged to contact the first author for future collaborative efforts.

When Behavioral Consultation Fails, examine the language of your consultee.

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